

City Nights

BY JAMES OPPENHEIM

FANNIE'S dull call, "Supper's ready," brought them one by one into the tiny rear dining-room. There was Ferguson, the old clerk, about fifty-five, a little man with white hair; his stout wife, Mary; Fannie, the faded daughter; and Edward, who was twenty-one. The little frame house was up a mean back street in Brooklyn, and though the windows were open, few noises came in; yet the summer night pervaded the room with an electric restlessness.

Edward was lanky, silent, and his lean face was flushed. He refused the lamb stew.

"Ed," said his father, in his thin voice, "you'd oughter eat; what's the matter with you?" He turned to his wife. "He's falling down at the office, too. Bradsley noticed it."

Father and son clerked with an express company on Broadway, their desks side by side.

"Maybe it's malaria," said Fannie.

"You might tell us what's the trouble," added his mother, "and not sulk around here. It doesn't make matters any pleasanter."

Edward glared at them and suddenly rose.

They knew well enough what troubled him, knew by his fresh necktie, his brushed suit, his polished shoes, and by the foolish question he put nightly to his mother, "Is my hair fixed straight?" Yet they pretended they didn't. He didn't give them credit for being somewhat afraid of him.

"What are you up to now?" piped his father.

"I'm going out, if you want to know!"

"Without supper?" shrilled his mother.

"Let me alone!" And out he went, slamming the front door. He took a lighted trolley at the corner, and the cool breeze and the shop-lights and the noise of the city seemed to pass through him. As usual he had used his family as the outlet for his emotions; his anger

was merely the blowing off of steam generated by something far different than anger. For he had made up his mind that he must bring matters to an end to-night; that this entangling process must be cut short.

"How can I marry," he asked himself, "on twenty a week? Why, we couldn't have children on that, and we'd have to live in some cheap flat, and stint and slave and be miserable. Twenty a week is nothing in New York. I've seen enough of it. There's that Spaniard, Marcellus, lives in Hoboken—wife sick all the time—no children. How'd I come to be such a fool?"

But even then the car swung a long curve and began to crawl up the incline of Brooklyn Bridge. Soon the roofs of Brooklyn sank lower, and beyond them the East River lay sunken between two cities, and all the night was strung and pierced by the lights; rows up the far, gray streets, necklaces over the other bridges, lamps on the wharves and in the windows, and under him the glowing ferry on the golden floor of waters. And looking at the New York sky-line, it seemed beautiful to him because she was somewhere beneath it. Her spirit suffused the lights, softening them, and the Night became the silent and still-growing Night, pressing close, bare-bosomed, her hair struck with stars.

Crossing City Hall Park, he felt as if he were drugged; as if, in spite of his reason, Nature had opened his skull and charged his brain-cells, so that he acted for her and against himself. But seated in the Broadway car, he felt free again, and the fierce debate went on, only to end in a foolish outburst of joy that made him want to laugh and shout. At Twenty-sixth Street he would get out, walk west, wait on her stoop. She would come down, link her arm with his, and they would take their walk down secret cross-town streets. If he failed her, she would never forgive him. She would

know that he was bringing their love to an end.

But at Twenty-third Street he was reasoning:

"I'm a clerk—there's no future for me. My father at fifty-five is getting forty a week—that's the limit. It's not fair to either of us to marry, and we can't have children. Suppose a child should come, though? We'd have to live in a tenement, and the kid wouldn't have a chance in the world. Besides, I want to break loose from clerking. I want to see the world."

And so the car passed Twenty-sixth Street, and he did not get out. At once he became greatly agitated, his heart painfully remorseful. He pictured her loneliness, her disappointment, her long evening sitting in her little bedroom—her tears, her anger. But he let the streets pass, let the rush of white lights, the drench of incandescence of the theater district, slip away, and thus it grew too late to return.

Late that night, in his room, this boy of twenty-one contemplated suicide.

"It's all over," he thought. "I've done it now, and I'll never be happy again; but how can I marry on twenty a week?"

He decided then to write her a letter, but the words seemed cruelly cold, murderous even.

"I wouldn't mind killing myself," he thought.

When Edward was seventeen or thereabout, at the time he left the steamship company where he was working, and became a clerk with the express company, a sort of haunting instinct seized him after supper—he would go aimlessly forth and feed his heart on the faces of girls and women by the light of shop-windows; through him and them the night drifted with mysterious beauty; they were blended by some uniting miracle; and though he was too shy to fall into the flirtations of street corners, however drawn by the whispers in shadow and the wonder of a boy's arm round a girl's shoulder, and the strange laughter that seemed about to reveal the secret of existence, he nevertheless went home throbbing—a boy tasting life.

There were other times of restlessness,

however, when he was plunged into the deepest hell of boyhood, but the way out did not appeal to him—one reason why he made no friends among his fellow-clerks.

He came no closer to the mystery for four years more; and then it came to him. It was a noon in spring when he was lunching in a large side-street restaurant, where clerks, stenographers, and office workers were cheaply and plenteously fed. He was one of four at table; two were girls, the other a pert and pleasant young salesman, seated opposite. The restaurant was overcrowded, and two made-up beauties, ten-dollar-a-week imitations of the newspaper pictures of "society" women, stood waiting and watching for seats.

The pert young fellow looked up, with a charming, impudent smile. He spoke to the nearest, who, in black, with powdered cheeks and brilliant dark eyes, was watching him,

"Waiting for my seat, eh?"

"Sure!" she responded, with equal impudence. "So get a move on." Some coarse repartee followed, with smothered laughter.

Edward frowned on this, and glanced at the girl at his left to see how she took it. Her cheeks were red, her head bent, and there was something fiercely passionate in her pose and expression. Edward felt his heart thumping. Then all at once she looked up, and their glances met, and he immediately had the illusion that all the city's nights were gathered in her eyes, that she held the secret that had set him throbbing; that all the wonder he had tasted from afar came together in her and grew intimate, terribly personal, flaming into his heart.

He heard his lips grow bolder than himself.

"He's pretty 'fresh,' isn't he?"

"Yes," she murmured.

That was all, but all that afternoon, all that night, his body throbbed, and in awe and exultation he told himself: "I've found her! I've found her!" And he did not know that the vulgarity he had frowned upon had been the means of kindling her and him.

Nor did he know what made that glow in him, that glow that grew, starting at his heart, filling his body, overflowing,

enlarging until he pendulated in it, a moth fluttering in a sea of light—Life, that, sweeping its infinite torrent up the ages, breaks into foam after foam of the generations. He gave himself up to it without questioning the future.

And the next morning he wondered why the people in the cars and street seemed as usual, why they were not as amazingly alive as he was. He felt as if, by accident, he had stumbled on a new force of nature, that was to transform human life as soon as it became known among men. But why was he the lucky one?

Even his trivial clerk's work, the jotting down of figures, the transcription of words, took on something flaming and fresh.

She came again that noon; he was there first and had the same seat. Then she took hers, and they nodded to each other.

Again his lips were bold.

"You always eat here?"

"Yes—for some time."

Their voices seemed like golden threads weaving them together.

"You've never tried Giles'?"

"Once—long ago."

"But it's—quieter than this." He wanted to say "less vulgar," but the words seemed affected.

"I guess it is."

"Why don't you try it again?"

"I will."

They both ordered the same lunch, but neither ate much.

He noticed then that her dark-green dress became her, that her face was a little thin, that she was well proportioned of body. He could not conclude that she was beautiful, nor did it matter. It was no detail of eye or nose or mouth, but the whole wonderful personality, the woman, the something flaming in her



"HOW CAN I MARRY ON TWENTY A WEEK?"

that came and went in her expression and gesture. And for the first time he wanted to know her name; but his lips were not bold enough for that.

Next day he was at Giles', trembling lest he had gone too far, sure that she would not come, for her coming would virtually constitute a prearranged meeting; she would be giving herself over to his society. He waited at the door, and every woman her size in the Broadway swarm was, at a distance, she, only to change on coming into focus. Then she came, looking a little frightened, but bearing herself with quivering pride.

They nodded, went in, sat down together. It was some time before their pounding hearts allowed them to speak.

"Have you been in the city long?" he asked.

"Three years."

And then they learned about each other. It was wonderful to learn about each other, to penetrate the flaming guard of the mystery and go familiarly together back down the diverse years. Was it possible that each had been living all this time without sharing life with the other?

She had come from Cumberland, Maryland, come as the whole world comes to New York, to make her fortune. Sometimes it seemed as if New York were a city of transients, millions swinging in, winning their way, and passing on. It had seemed necessary for her to come, as it had seemed necessary for Edward's father. She wanted to *live*, to expend her accumulated mountain vitality on human beings; but she was basely deceived. The great human-crowded city pulsed in at morn and out at night, and passed her carelessly. She was a stranger on the streets; the busy shops, the swarming offices had no place for her; the city from its sky-scraper towers down to printing-press cellars shut her out. She answered the advertisements in the paper, tried the department stores, the factories. She then secured her first job, addressing envelopes at a dollar a thousand. By writing rapidly, never pausing, shortening her lunch-hour, she did a thousand in a day, and earned six dollars a week.

She lived in a hall bedroom, a four-by-ten affair, in a lodging-house on West Twenty-sixth Street. This cost her two dollars a week. She did her own washing at night, she walked to and from work in good weather, and she lunched cheaply. But, despite her efforts, she used up all she made, and there was no future. Of course, Cumberland had warned her against coming, so she couldn't return.

The worst she did not tell. This was her naked loneliness. She made no friends among the girl-workers, for she was secretive and shy and sensitive, and disliked their city boldness; and as for men, how could she meet them? A few in the lodging-house passed her sometimes on the stairs, but never spoke. Lately she had grown desperate—desperate during the long spring evenings, when with window open she heard the city passing by, or saw the sky-line mys-

terious with lights, or, leaning from the window, saw in the blazing glitter of Eighth Avenue youth swirling.

Was she not young herself? Could she condemn herself to a life of addressing envelopes, washing clothes, and eating in cheap restaurants? She could understand why lonely girls went to dance-halls and destruction. Anything seemed better than this. Better to *live*, she thought, whether in clean joy or downright sin, than to go on in this dead, unpulsing twilight.

And so, when she glanced into Edward's sad brown eyes, and felt the power of his unspoiled youth, there was nothing to do but follow where he led. To her he meant the opening of the gates of the city. Henceforth she could possess the streets and have the freedom of the nights.

As they left the restaurant he said, very awkwardly:

"My name is Edward Ferguson."

"And mine," she laughed, "is Frances Waller."

It seemed to him that Frances Waller was the most beautiful name that had ever been given to a woman.

Their wooing went rapidly after that; but it was a typical New York wooing. There was no private parlor, no secret garden, only the crowded and public ways, the street, the car, the excursion, the restaurant, and the park; the walk, close together, arm artlessly brushing arm, down the dark side street; the proud stride among the crowds of the electric-lit avenues; the casual contact on the seat of the open car as it darted through the swarming city night; the Sunday afternoon in the park, up by-paths where they could stand and gaze on the moist daffodil and budding leaf; the public-school lectures where they sat out the rainy evening, glad to be able to touch hands in the darkness of the stereopticon. But always the throbbing secrecy of the meeting on her stoop after supper, and the sense of adventure as they penetrated the dark and spangled sides of the city.

But after the first innocent joy of their love had worn off, a restless period set in. Edward found himself subject to strange changes of mood. A terrible depression would weigh him down—when

he felt that he hated Frances, especially when, now and again, her little personal peculiarities asserted themselves; this would be followed by a mood of fierce joy, when his love became a repressed frenzy, making him stop work; again he was absent-minded, and yet again acted as if he were drugged. It began to dawn on him that wooing could not go on forever, that it was terrible in both its joys and its pain—the happiness too frail and exquisite to last, the pangs that made his nights a torment. And it was ruining his work, too, and spoiling his temper. It was evident that he had to put a stop

to this condition which brought him inevitably face to face with marriage.

This was the most solemn thing of all, a revolution complete, the taking on of responsibility, the self-enslavement, giving over his body and soul to a new routine, a duty never ended, binding him for life. How could he do it on twenty a week? What future had he to offer his wife? Where could they live decently? And as for children, did he have a right to marry, knowing beforehand that a child born to him would be a curse? So, at least, it appeared to him.

Once or twice of late he and Frances



HE HAD THE ILLUSION THAT ALL THE CITY NIGHTS WERE GATHERED IN HER EYES

had had lovers' quarrels, silly things, unexpected, amazing them both and putting both to shame.

Once in a car he found himself saying hotly:

"Why do you turn when those fellows back there laugh?"

Could she stoop so low as to explain that she had involuntarily and very slightly turned her head? Did he think she was trying to flirt? Her cheeks grew hot, and she groped up, leaving her seat.

"I want to get out; please let me pass!"

Of course he didn't let her pass, but it took two hours of abasing himself to bring an outward peace.

Such spats furnished him with opportunities to break off with her; but he didn't use them, and they were followed by heavenly hours of reunion, when it seemed as if their love deepened and they became wise and beautiful before each other.

However, by riding past Twenty-sixth Street on this Friday night, he felt as if he had broken up matters completely; he had failed in his appointment and she would never forgive him. And so he contemplated taking his own life.

Saturday morning was hot. Edward was down early, took a quick breakfast, and reached the office before his father. Saturday was a half-holiday, and a spirit of laziness pervaded the place; as if the clerks were dreaming of the afternoon by the sea or in the meadows, or of the girls who were to meet them at ferry-landing or bridge-entrance. And so the hours passed tediously, broken only by the welcome sight of Bradsley with a satchel full of pay-envelopes. As the gong sounded at one there was a rush for the street, where the hurrying crowd, the swarming cars, showed the lower city emptying out, disgorging its prisoners.

Edward went to Giles' restaurant, searched to the rear and back, scanned the incoming faces, explained to the cashier that he owed no money for lunch, and then threaded Broadway feverishly, plunging down a side street to the loft-building where Frances worked. He had to climb two flights of steep stairs, and the dull greenish-yellow loft held a hundred girls at the long board tables, but Frances was not there.

"She's left early," he thought, "or maybe she was sick, didn't come at all!"

A sob rose in his throat; he went down in the street, and for speed's sake took the Sixth Avenue elevated train to Twenty-third Street. He felt as if he could not reach her quickly enough. All through the morning, as well as at intervals during the sleepless night, he knew how he had wronged Frances; he should have gone to her and threshed matters out with her; surely she would understand. And over and over again he thought of the agony he had caused her, and he wished that a millstone were hung about his neck and that he were drowned. What an unmanly thing to do! what cowardice! He was almost distraught with remorse.

He hurried up Twenty-sixth Street, which looked squalid enough with its red-brick houses; he stepped up the stoop and pulled the bell. Unkempt, fat Mrs. Neilson opened the door.

"Miss Waller in?" He tried to keep his passion from his voice.

"Wait in the hall. I'll see."

Her slippers almost came off with each step upward, and Edward thought, "If I don't marry Frances, she'll have to go on in this place—and addressing envelopes—and being alone in the city."

Then it struck him that he had never even kissed her, so shy had been their love-making, and all at once he felt the fact that she was in this house, and that he wanted her.

And then she came, slow, proud, her face pale, her eyes ringed with blue depression.

"Well?" she said.

"Frances," he cried, low, "I know it was rotten of me. I couldn't help it."

"Why not?" she flashed.

"It got pretty late. . . . I . . . want to talk to you. . . ."

They faced each other, silent, and suddenly he felt that she hated him, and that he hated her.

But he found himself saying:

"You're not coming out with me this afternoon?"

"Why should I?"

"Why not?"

"You know why."

Again they were silent.

"Frances!"

"Well?"

"Say, Frances—say, if you knew how I felt . . ."

She burst out on him with strange passion, amazing him:

"Well, I'll go with you. Where do you want to go?"

"To Coney Island, Frances?"

"Then wait a minute."

Never had they seemed stranger to each other. Five minutes later they were out and taking the down-town car. And Frances asked for no explanation, and Edward felt too numb to offer any. They both seemed frozen, hateful to each other.

Naturally everything went wrong. The crowd at the Bridge was suffocating, the trains jammed, and when at last they found seats and were borne over the Bridge and down through Brooklyn and out over the glaring Long Island flats, the car seemed to sweat with humanity. Yet Edward, gazing at the view, and seeing only Frances's black hat, her soft hair, and her determined profile, felt subtly thrilled. However, a moment later she spoke for the first time, with snapping exasperation:

"I don't see why we're going—these awful crowds—I hate them."

He thought it quite despicable of her; she should have been "game," now that they were on the way. And he began to plan what he would say to her, what his circumstances were, and about children, and how impossible it was for them to marry.

"But I'll wait till she's quieted down."

It was a long wait. At Coney Island they descended into a fighting blackness of people hemmed in by glittering plaster walls, noisy restaurants, merry-go-rounds, scenic railways, and the beating of bells and drums and blowing of brass. Ordinarily a wind of gaiety would have swept them whole-heartedly into the vivid life of this place of the spirit, this Island of Enchantment that released the people from weary labor and sharp-edged care; but in the hot sunlight it seemed to them a mere pleasure sham, a place to gorge oneself on popcorn and sausages, and be led on from one "fake" of fun to another.

And so this afternoon Frances hated it, and said so more than once.

"You might let up on it—we're here!" Edward muttered.

"I guess," snapped Frances, "I'd better go home!"

They left the crowd and went out to the sand, but that, too, swarmed with women and children. They found a bench, facing the sea, and of course there should have been the romance they always felt in watching the blue, sunlit ocean sway, spilling on the sands; but mosquitoes buzzed about them, the sea was glaring with sun and hurt their eyes, and the afternoon was stifling with heat.

A popcorn-and-candy vender came around with his tray, and Edward offered to buy, but Frances interposed.

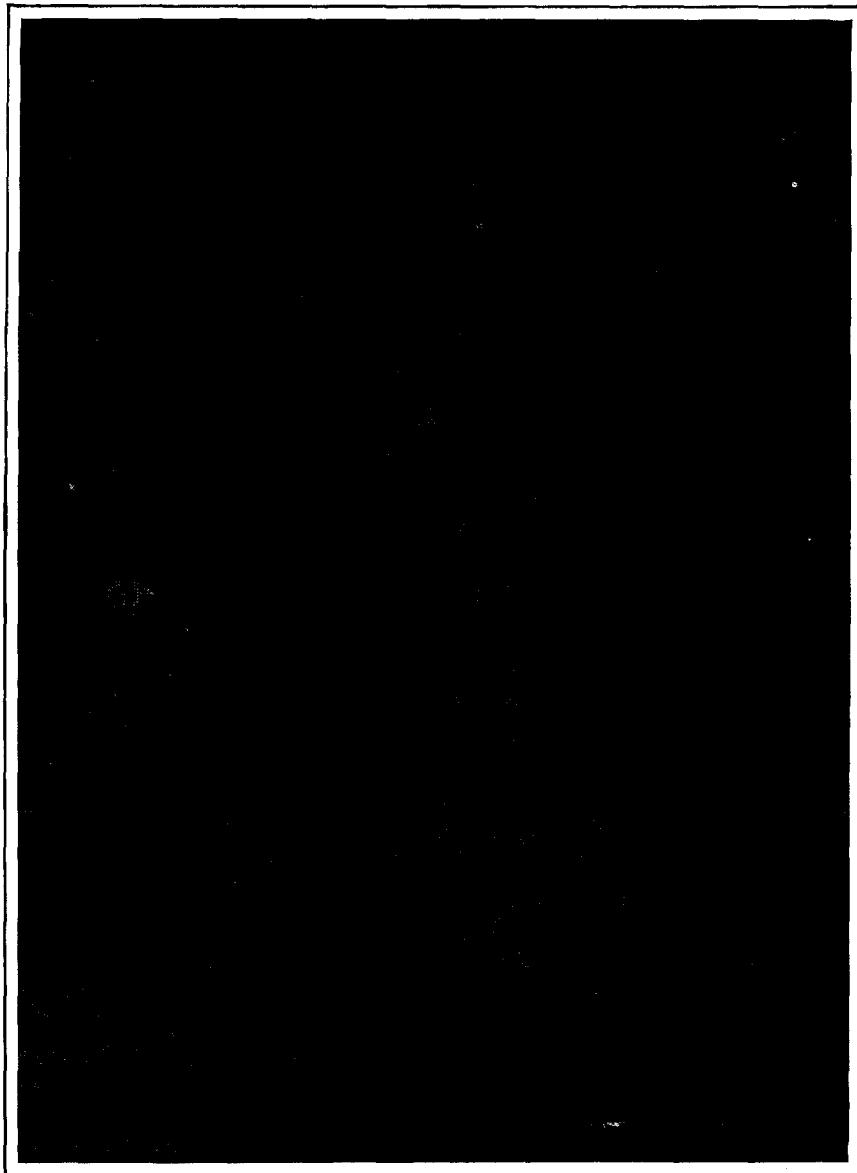
"Ed," she said, "you've no right to spend money on that. You've little enough as it is."

He desisted, knowing that Frances was a wonderful girl, but he felt annoyed, nevertheless. And as the long three hours pulsed away, with crowded excursion-boats coming up on the sea and a white sail in the blue distance or some four-stacked steamer going down over the horizon, Edward tried to formulate what he had to say, and said nothing. They were both silent, until finally Frances left him, dropped on the sand, and played with three dirty little children.

They had supper in a small city restaurant that stands a little beyond the noise of Coney; the meal consisted of peppery clam-chowder, crackers, and coffee, and neither enjoyed it. They felt more and more miserable and wished they hadn't come. They could not look each other in the face now.

Then after supper they went back to the empty sands. Shadows were lengthening on the sea, and a large, serene evening, full of cool air, began to deepen into twilight. Melodious waves whitened on the shore, and blue and green and violet were on the heave of the immense waters. Quietness came and the beauty that dissolves the restlessness of human hearts. They walked side by side, close to the music of the waves, and all at once they were alone, and they were together.

Now was the time to speak; now if ever, Edward could free himself, now with Frances growing quiet beside him, and all annoyance and fretfulness falling away. He felt full of peace and pity;



"FRANCES," HE FOUND HIMSELF WHISPERING

he knew now that she must forgive him; he knew that now she was ready to understand.

But they went on walking in silence, passing away from Coney and over to the beach beyond. They had to step up on the board-walk to reach the sands, and in so doing passed a dance-hall. A waltz was floating dreamily

through the evening air, and they paused and looked in. The dancers were just beginning to whirl on the long, level floor, in a blaze of electric light. Both Frances and Edward noticed a lonely girl sitting against the wall. She was dark, homely, with worn, fagged face and big feet and hands and nose; her stockings were white, and she had on tawdry white

shoes, faded, cheap white dress, and large, overflowing hat; but she sang out loud with the music, and her feet beat the floor in time. A common enough sight—a thin, starved life thirsting for joy and comradeship.

Glancing at her, it struck Edward that such was Frances's future if she did not marry—the starved, lonely city life of a manless girl. Possibly Frances felt some of this, too.

They went on down the sands. Night had come, the large summer night with throbbing stars, and out of darkness a liquid song of waves breaking their mystery at the feet of men and women. They walked along the sand. Out on the waters were sparkles of light, and in the distance the sharp, vanishing glance of a lighthouse. And all the mystery of life returned upon them with manifold beauty. First they felt their hearts melting within them and the hollows of their breasts filling with lovely beatitude.

They stood still, the rustle of waters at their feet.

“Frances,” he found himself whisper-

ing. He groped and clasped her cool hand. She stood a little nearer.

“Oh, Edward,” she sighed, with poignant sadness, “how could you? how could you?”

He found her other hand, and suddenly Nature seized each of them in a starry fist and brought them together; what did Nature care whether her children willed to mate or not? They felt a terrific gravitation, a breaking of the waters, a fierce, exultant sweep toward each other.

“Oh, Frances!” he cried, and with that they clasped, and they kissed. And through that kiss, as through a magic door, they passed into an enchanted region where they were no more Frances and Edward, or man and woman, but a two-hearted god, swaying with glory.

“I love you,” he breathed, and then added, “I wanted to say this last night, but I was a coward—I couldn't come.”

“It doesn't matter,” she cried; “it doesn't matter!”

But even as they kissed again he knew what he was doing, . . . knew it all, . . . and he didn't care.